

Rosdolsky's methodology and Lange's revisionism

Among non-Stalinist but leadership-conscious Marxists there is hardly a work that has gained the acclaim accorded to *The Making of Marx's 'CAPITAL'* by Roman Rosdolsky. Published in Germany in 1968, it has now been brought out by Pluto Press in an English translation for the fantastic sum of \$35. It is as if the price itself testifies to its importance. If not a "classic", it is, after all, about the only available lengthy, serious commentary on Marx's *Grundrisse*, which has only recently been published in English for the first-time.

Roman Rosdolsky, a well-known Marxist theoretician, tells us that ever since 1948, when he obtained one of the rare copies of the *Grundrisse* then available, he has been studying that "Rough Draft" of *Capital* and set himself a two-fold task: (1) to write a commentary, or more precisely, an exposition of the new discovery "mainly in Marx's own words"; and (2) "to make a scientific evaluation of some of the new findings which it contained" (p. xi). The preoccupation with the latter comprises Roman Rosdolsky's original contribution. To it he devotes Parts One and Seven—"Introduction", i.e., mainly the origin and structure of the work; and "Critical Excursus". To these 225 pages should really be added some 35 pages (Part Six, "Conclusion") which summarize what he found in the exposition and commentary of the work.* Since, as he correctly notes, "Of all the problems in Marx's economic theory the most neglected has been that of his method both in general and, specifically, in relation to Hegel", methodology is the underlying motif not only of his "critical excursus", but the reason for writing the whole of the 581 pages.

I wish I could report that a genuine contribution to dialectical methodology had been made by Rosdolsky. Unfortunately, nothing could be further from the truth. If there is anything that is totally missing in his massive study it is dialectics. To the extent to which he does make a contribution to the comprehension of the *Grundrisse* (lots of quotations, especially on Money, but no self-movement of the whole) the reader gets neither a view of the historical sweep of Marx's concept of what the totality of his greatest work was to be, nor an understanding of why Marx nevertheless decided to start everything "anew".

THE MISSING DIALECTIC

This is said not to play down the significance of the *Grundrisse*, much less to say that "starting anew" meant Marx discarded the validity of the range of the "Rough Outline" just because, instead of the six books there listed, Marx readied for publication only three, and finished only one. Quite the contrary. While he definitely rejected its shapelessness, comparing it to the formlessness of "sauerkraut and carrots", Marx meant to develop further some of the most brilliant and profound of his writings that could not find their way into the new dialectic structure of *Capital*, Volume I—like "The Pre-

*Contrast this to Ch. 2, Section B, entitled "The 1850's: The *Grundrisse*, Then and Now", pp. 61-76, *Philosophy and Revolution*; also for changes in the structure of *Capital*, see Marx's *CAPITAL* and *Today's Global Crisis*, especially sections entitled "The Relationship of History to Theory", pp. 29-36, and "Appearance and Reality", pp. 77-82.

Capitalist Economic Forms", and "the absolute movement of becoming". We get a whiff of this in a footnote in the totally new "Fetishism of Commodities" when he refers to the Taiping Revolution, as against the quiescent European workers following the 1848 revolutionary defeats, as if China embarked on their revolution "to encourage" the Europeans to revolt.

Rosdolsky on the other hand, who writes 581 pages to expound the *Grundrisse*, has not a word to say about the originality, dialectic, and dimension of the new, totally new, concept of the Orient, China especially, contained in "Pre-Capitalist Economic Forms", though the period he was writing in followed the 1949 Chinese Revolution, which was the compulsion for the European Marxists to publish, first, that very section, and finally the whole of the *Grundrisse*. (The English translation, however, first came out in 1973.)

It was the specific section on the economic forms preceding capitalist production that became most relevant to the new birth of a "Third World." Nor was it only a question of relevance. It was the dialectics of liberation that gave the dialectic of thought a new dimension of revolution. It is the dialectic that is missing from Rosdolsky's methodology. By using it synonymously with methodology he has managed to reduce both to mere presupposition.

THE PRESUPPOSITION

Let's take a second look at Rosdolsky's claimed preoccupation with methodology. It has led him, among other things, to create a special Appendix directly to Part One on Rosa Luxemburg's *Accumulation of Capital* rather than wait for the end of his work where he deals with all debates on Volume II of *Capital*, including, of course, Luxemburg's critique of Marx's theory of accumulation (pages 490-505). What, in the first part, he entitles "Methodological Comments on Rosa Luxemburg's Critique of Marx's Schemes of Reproduction" (pages 63-72) turns out to be a question of Marx's presupposition of a "closed capitalist society."

Luxemburg uses neither the word, dialectic, nor methodology, making it clear that she is arguing against

Marx's "theoretical assumption of a society of capitalists and workers only", and not against the dialectical development flowing from this. It is the assumption that, she claims, is "a bloodless theoretical fiction" as against the reality of "third groups" and capitalism being surrounded by non-capitalist lands. Indeed, she stresses that it is "the spirit of Marxist theory" that demands we "abandon the premise of the first volume."

The issue has been debated for more than a half century. What is new in Rosdolsky is the claim that it was not done methodologically, that her error in grappling with the problems in Volume II of *Capital* was that she "underestimated the so-called 'Hegelian inheritance' in Marx's thought" (p.492). The irony is that what he cites as proof was her criticism, not of Vol. II, but Vol. I. So aroused was she over the attacks on her *Accumulation of Capital* that far from "underestimating Hegelian inheritance", she hit out against Marx's "famed Volume I of *Capital* with its Hegelian Rococo ornamentation" which she now (March 8, 1917) wrote "is quite abhorrent to me." Rosdolsky, however, proceeds on his merry way, exposing "the dialectic content hiding behind Marx's 'Hegelian style'"—as if style were the issue.

In truth, so total is his blindness to dialectic as content as well as form, as self-movement, self-development, self-activity—all internal, with external being the objectification, manifestation, the non-human—that, by the end of his 445 pages of exposition, Rosdolsky succeeds in reducing to absurdity the very meaning of the word, the very specific word that Marx, and Marx alone, used so incisively and originally: Reification.

Where Marx used the word to prove the horrors of capitalistic alienation of the laborer, reducing man to thing, Rosdolsky applies it to economic category, entitling the concluding chapter of his exposition, "The Reification of Economic Categories . . ." Where Marx demonstrates that the mystification of economic categories, the fetishism of commodities, all arise from the very "perversity" (Marx's expression) of relation of object to subject, relations between men assuming the "fantastic form of relations between things," Rosdolsky puts mystification of things on a par with "reification of labor".

Marx does the exact opposite, demonstrating that the reason why the perversion of subject to object assumes that form is due to the fact that, in the process of production, that is what production relations "really are": laborers are mere appendages to machines. The reader can now see that my criticism of Rosdolsky sticking so narrowly to the *Grundrisse* meant, not a way of playing down the importance of *Grundrisse*, but stressing that, in form, and in content and articulation of economic categories, economic laws of development through contradiction and crises—the "law of motion" of capitalism to its collapse—Marx's final statement is not in *Grundrisse*, but in *Capital*.

Rosdolsky, however, is preoccupied with the changes "in general" rather than in the particular, with the number of books rather than the changes within the first volume of *Capital*, which is, after all, the only one Marx fully prepared for the printer, 1867. After that, he again introduced changes he considered so important that he asked even those who had read it in the original to read the new French edition (1872-75) since it "possesses a scientific value independent of the original."* Rosdolsky, on the other hand, is veritably obsessed with "the movement from the abstract to the concrete" as if the dialectic never gets to the concrete.

It is true Rosdolsky has made some valuable contributions, the most important being that he makes clear that the Humanism of the young Marx, 1844, the relationship of Marx to Hegel of the mature Marx, the Marx of the *Grundrisse*, 1887-58, and the "scientific" socialism of the Marx of *Capital*, 1867-83, are all one and the same. It is surely valuable when the one who says this is not a "Hegelian Marxist", but an "economist."

It is also valuable when Rosdolsky demonstrates that, although Marx finished only three books after he outlined six, what seemed to have been left out, like the book on Landed Property, actually was incorporated in the part on Rent in Volume III. And Rosdolsky does indeed make mincemeat of Karl Kautsky's contentions: (1) that the historic sweep of Marx's famous chapter, "Historical Tendency of Accumulation", is but a variation of "Change in the Appearance of the Law of Appropriation"; and (2) that the outline in 1862-63 was already the finished new outline of *Capital*, 1866, which Rosdolsky correctly shows, would have meant "nothing short of disregarding the Working Day, Simple Cooperation, Division of Labor, etc." (p. 17). But Rosdolsky himself fails to see that the writing of some 75 pages on The Working Day directly into the "abstract" theoretic volume I, while relegating to Vol. IV the contending with

all the other "Theories of Surplus Value", meant an actual break with the very concept of theory, both as dialectics of thought and dialectics of liberation.

Instead, Rosdolsky decided to conclude his "Critical Excursus" with a special chapter in praise of Oscar Lange's *Political Economy* which, says Rosdolsky, "is to our knowledge the only work in more recent academic Marxist literature which consciously, and in detail, takes up the question of the methodology of Marx's *Capital*" (p. 552). This would, to say the least, sound peculiar to all except Rosdolsky who is himself deaf to the dialectic. It was Lange who rushed to the defense of the Stalinist break with the dialectic structure of *Capital* and — integral to that break — the revision of the Marxist analysis of the law of value, when I translated that article

from *Pod Znamenem Marxizma (Under the Banner of Marxism)* in the *American Economic Review* of Sept. 1944. The authors had proposed that in the future Russian teaching should not follow the structure of *Capital*.

In my commentary, I stated that this was but the reflection of "economic reality," that is to say, the state-capitalist, not socialist reality.

In the excuse that, "tempting" as discussions of value would be, it is outside the confines of his study, Roman Rosdolsky has not a word to say of this debate.* I doubt that that is the reason for his silence, and not only because he chose, as the very climax of his work, to end with a discussion of Lange, full of praise of his *Political Economy* for devoting three chapters to "methodology." No, my doubt is due to the fact that this is not a question of debates, inside or outside of Russia. It is a question of the actual revision of Marx's view that the law of value is the motivating force of capitalism. It is a question of timing — the height of World War II — and the Russian workers could have told Rosdolsky that Stalin was announcing that there was to be no change in the exploitative reality even after the successful end of the war.

As he said, what is actually at stake, whether Roman Rosdolsky was or was not conscious of it, is that tail-ending Stalinist economism is unavoidable when the Subject — freely associated labor — is left as an abstraction. This leads inexorably to the failure to grapple with the dialectic. To understand how this is so we must return to Marx.

Marx wrote 881 pages of the "Rough Draft" of what was to be *Capital* i.e., the *Grundrisse*, and only in the very last paragraph he writes "The first category in which bourgeois wealth presents itself is that of the commodity," and then notes that "This section is to be brought forward." To Engels he writes that, now that he wishes to single out some of these chapters and rework them for publication, "before the deluge" — that is, before the economic crisis of 1857-58 runs its course, perhaps even to revolution — he finds that he must first construct a new first chapter as he doesn't have one on Commodity. And this he did for the 1859 publication, *Critique of Political Economy*. But this too is no sooner published than, once again, Marx is dissatisfied both with "the form of presentation," and structure of the whole six books he outlined.

*Which is less, I might add, than even Lange did in his very last compilation of his writings before his death. It is true he does not mention me, but he does mention his own article in the *American Economic Review*, and there is no way to read that without knowing the new Stalinist thesis, and his defense of it.

*Elsewhere I go into detail on these changes. See especially "The Paris Commune Illuminates and Deepens the Content of *Capital*", and "The Breakdown of Capitalism: Crises, Human Freedom and Vol. II of *Capital*" in Marx's *CAPITAL* and Today's Global Crisis.

By the time — eight years later — Marx had completed his analysis of the economic laws of capitalist production and, as an active revolutionary, was head of the first International Workingmen's Association, Marx had decided to start ab ovo. Nor was it only a matter of a new outline of three instead of six books. Everything was new, and nothing more so than the split in the category of labor into abstract and concrete labor.

Because Marx considered that split in the category of labor his most original contribution, crucial to "all understanding of political economy," he no sooner began Chapter 1, Commodities, with their twofold nature — use-value and exchange-value — than he made it clear that that was not the essence, that he must at once go to the essence—the twofold character of labor itself. By the time he had finished that first chapter there was also a totally new section, the last, entitled "The Fetishism of Commodities." It was clear by then that he had "thrown out" what had previously followed Commodity, and Money — history of the theory of each category, all of which had been relegated to Volume IV of Capital.

The Fetishism of Commodities has since become not only one of the most famous of Marx's writings, but so bothersome to all exploitative state powers, especially those calling themselves "socialist," that evidently they just cannot live with it. What Stalin declared necessary for "the teaching" has since been codified, without any acknowledgment such as they had to make in 1943 when it flew in the face of all previous "teaching" by friend and foe alike. Discarding, or making an abstraction, of the concrete imperative of freely-associated labor taking destiny into its own hands, stripping away the fetishism of commodities, of Plan, of anything and everything non-human, and declaring, with Marx, "Human power is its own end," inexorably leads one to tailend Stalinism, that is to say, state-capitalist "methodology."

Just as Lange's "methodology" was pragmatic, Stalinist eclectic, so was Rosdolsky's. Despite all talk of dialectic, and relationship of Marx to Hegel, Rosdolsky, by no accident whatever, concluded that one need "no longer bite into the sour apple, study the whole of Hegel's Logic in order to understand Marx's Capital — one can arrive at the same end, directly, by studying the Rough Draft" (p. 570). Too bad that all Rosdolsky arrived at by the end of his study of the "Rough Draft" was the quagmire of Polish neo-Stalinism which Rosdolsky calls "neo-Marxism."

Thus does the dialectic wreak its venegence on non-Stalinist pragmatists who skip over Marx's admonition that the Hegelian dialectic "is the source of all dialectic" as well as Lenin's conclusion that it is, indeed, impossible to understand Marx's Capital "especially its first chapter, without studying the whole of Hegel's Logic."